



MICHIGAN STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

Michigan Historical Center
Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries
702 W. Kalamazoo
Box 30740
Lansing, MI 48909-8240

www.michigan.gov/shpo

email: preservation@michigan.gov
(517) 373-1630

IN OUR OPINION...

FENCES IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

While not often found at the front of a city lot, the fence is frequently a delightful feature of the back of the premises, where it may enclose the kitchen garden or perhaps screen a quiet resting spot, for backyards can be used for storing peace and comfort and beauty as well as garbage cans, clothes lines, and rubbish. Fences for such a purpose are usually wood lattice or mesh wire, overgrown with flowering vines. They screen the garden not only from the street, but from the next door neighbor and with their wealth of climbing vines and blossoms give pleasure to all who look upon them. "Fences, Walls & Hedges." American Homes & Gardens. September 1910. Vol. VII, No. 9

"Good fences make good neighbors." This sentiment taken from the poem *Mending Wall* by Robert Frost is applicable today in residential neighborhoods where some degree of privacy or separation may be desired. While there may be truth to the line from Frost's poem, one could argue that what *kind* of fence separates neighbors can play a role in how the neighbors view each other. For example, a six-foot tall, solid privacy fence has a much different impact than a four-foot tall ornamental wire fence.

Fences in Designated Local Historic Districts

Because the issue of fences, fence material, and fence design can become an issue in a historic district, we have developed an opinion on appropriate fence design and materials in local historic districts. Much as we would like to give a firm yes or no on, say, the use of specific modern materials, like vinyl fencing, we don't feel it is appropriate. Fencing material must be reviewed on a case-by-case basis to determine what affect it has on the resource and its feeling and setting. Here are some things to consider when reviewing a proposal for modern fencing material:

Applying the Standards - In Our Opinion

Historic lawn features, such as fences, should be retained and repaired or replaced in kind whenever possible.

Fencing a front yard would typically not have been done historically and should be discouraged.

Any modern fencing material that is used in a local historic district should meet the *Secretary's Standards for Cultural Landscapes* which state that a feature should be visually compatible in its "mass, scale, form, features, materials, texture or color" to the landscape so that it does not "detract from" or "alter the historic character of" the landscape. Many of the fence designs and materials that can be obtained at home improvement centers do not replicate the look and feel of historic materials and "detracts from" the landscape. The modern fence stands out in the landscape and is not visually compatible with it. Such a fence becomes the central focus of the landscape, not the frame, and thus is not in keeping with gardening trends of the past that set the feeling and setting for a historic home. If modern fencing material meets the Standard then it could be used. A fencing material can never be rejected outright; it must be reviewed in terms of its size, shape, profile, and texture and for its affect on the visual harmony of the landscape. Commissioners should also consider where the fence will be placed, its visibility factor, and its function (decoration, screening, or utilitarian). Example: A vinyl fence at the back of a property that is secluded by hedges may be appropriate. A vinyl fence to screen trash bins on a back alley may be appropriate. A vinyl fence in a front yard is probably not appropriate.

Chain link and wire fence are historically appropriate materials for historic landscapes. The use of vegetation to hide or soften these fences should be encouraged.

High Board privacy fences and lattice fences were commonly used in backyards to screen or create private areas. Modern diagonal lattice was not typical and is not appropriate. Such fences were erected for the decorative value as well as the screen functioning.

Determine the Appropriate Standards

Use the *Secretary of the Interior's Rehabilitation Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes* when reviewing landscape features. Under Structures, Furnishings, and Objects these guidelines state:

Alterations/additions for the New Use	
Recommended	Not recommended
Designing and installing a new structure, furnishing or object when required by the new use, which is compatible with the historic character of the landscape.	Placing a new structure, furnishing, or object where it may cause damage, or is incompatible with the historic character of the landscape.
	Locating any new structure, furnishing or object in such a way that it detracts from or alters the historic character of the landscape.
	Introducing a new structure, furnishing, or object in an appropriate location, but making it visually incompatible in mass, scale, form features, materials, texture or color.

Determine the Historic Context

Whenever possible, historic district commissions should work to collect historic images of the community's historic districts in order to have a foundation of information about the historic

character of the district that will assist them in making decisions. If individual photographs of the specific house cannot be found, then use images of the neighborhood or other similar neighborhoods in the community.

Publications from the period are also good sources of information. There are a wide range of landscape architecture and gardening books available at the Library of Michigan or at your local university library. Many of the books can be accessed through your local library using the new Michigan Electronic Library (MEL) system that lets you request books from around the state. (See the Library of Michigan at www.michigan.gov/hal). Period magazines that deal with landscapes such as *American Homes and Gardens*, *Country Life in America*, *The Craftsman*, *House and Garden*, and *House Beautiful* are on the shelves at the Library of Michigan and at many university libraries. *Old House Journal* is a modern magazine that often has advertisements for reproduction materials that could be used.

The following information regarding yards and fencing was summarized from landscape architecture books and gardening magazines published between 1910 and 1930.

Front Yards

Property owners were encouraged to view front yards as public space. Sweeping open lawns bordered by undulating shrubbery were recommended. Lawns should be united along the street giving an impression of open space. Uniformity in plant choices, such as street trees, was encouraged. Fencing front yards was discouraged. If fencing did occur in the front, it was decorative and served as a frame for the picture of the house on the site.

Side Yards

Side yards should be considered a continuation of the front yard. Open lawns, with perhaps some additional plantings to provide screening for the back yard may be appropriate. Typically, however, enclosing a side yard with a privacy fence is not recommended.

Back Yards

Back yards should be considered to be the area behind the line drawn parallel with the primary rear wall of the structure. For example, on a two-story house with a one-story rear kitchen addition, the back yard should be considered to start at the two-story rear wall. Back yards were viewed as having separate areas with different functions: areas of repose and relaxation; work areas for drying laundry, performing outdoor tasks, or growing vegetable gardens; and service areas for storage or trash bins. Thus fences had three functions:

- Screening - create areas of privacy or to hide service areas
- Decorative - frame vistas or add visual interest to the garden
- Utilitarian - keep out children and animals (they never mention keeping them in!)

Screen Fencing

High Board Fence - What we today would call a privacy fence was considered to be a good choice for screening or for creating privacy in the back yard. A solid fence with a lattice top was

considered a "good choice." It was advised that such fences should be in a "subdued color" and "partly concealed by vines and tall shrubs."

Lattice Fences - Wood lattice fences "with their wealth of climbing vines and blossoms give pleasure to all who look upon them." (Note: the wood lattice of the past was not the diagonal slat lattice of today. Slat were perpendicular and openings were square. Openings could be small or large.) One author cautioned that "Lattice is both decorative and utilitarian in purpose; the only danger is using it so freely that it becomes tiresome."

Decorative Fencing

The overriding advice: the simpler the architecture of the house, the simpler the fence designs. For example while decorative iron fencing lent an element of beauty to a country estate, it was thought to be too "formidable" for cottages and bungalows. So, the black aluminum fencing that simulates iron fences and is so popular today is probably too "formidable" for most middle or working class neighborhoods. Picket fencing that didn't obscure the view and let the eye travel over and through it was considered most appropriate for medium to small homes. Simple picket fences with a more elaborate gate way (such as an arbor or a pergola) were encouraged.

Utilitarian Fencing

Wire fence was considered to be the simplest and most effective type of utilitarian fence. "Coarse wire mesh fence hung on an iron frame" was considered to be "almost invisible and really imperative where fruit, vegetables, not to speak of flowers, need protection." Wire fence could be simply utilitarian--single strands of horizontal and vertical wire joined together perpendicularly. The Page Fence Company of Adrian, MI made Style 1648, a 16 bar, 48-inch high fence for "fencing gardens in between town and city lots." The openings were smaller at the bottom to keep out small animals. Another popular--and charming--fence was the more decorative twisted wire fence. This galvanized wire fence had a decorative pattern and finished crown and bottom. A third type of wire fence was chain link fence, which came into popularity in America in the 1890s.

Most garden magazines of the early twentieth century encouraged the use of wire fence for its practicality. However, they took issue with its plain, utilitarian look and encouraged the use of climbing vines and shrubbery to hide it. The use of a wood decorative gate (pergola or arch) attached to a wire fence that was covered in flowering vines or masked with shrubs was encouraged.

Conclusion

In conclusion, local decisions on appropriate fencing should be considered on a case-by-case basis. The history of the district and its landscape features, publications from the period, and National Park Service Guidelines can all be used to assist in an appropriate determination regarding fences. Caution should be exercised in making any blanket statements or policies regarding fence material or design. Fences of an appropriate material and design can indeed make for good neighbors.